

# MOTHER EARTH, MOTHER AFRICA & AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS



EDITORS

Nobuntu Penxa Matholeni  
Georgina Kwanima Boateng  
Molly Manyonganise

# 2

## BEMBA RITUALS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

### Experiences of the wives of *Bashi Cingo* in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church

Bridget N. Masaiti Mukuka<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

This chapter seeks to investigate the rituals around the wives of *Bashi Cingo* by using a feminist narrative. The chapter examines the experiences of the wives of *Bashi Cingo* in relation to their cultural beliefs that forbid them to cultivate the land. I explore the rituals' links with the wives and the environment and, of course, their spiritual connection with the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church in Zambia. I will employ Mercy Amba Oduyoye's (1995) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's (2011) feminist methods of inquiry to guide this chapter. I found that some wives of *Bashi Cingo* have fairly low levels of support from the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church and from the community. Also, it took some months to bury the founder of the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, because he came from the lineage of the Bemba chief, *Chitimukulu*, in the Northern Province of Zambia. This demonstrates the influence of Bemba<sup>2</sup> culture and biblical scriptures in formulating some church policies that reinforce the rituals. It also uses a measure of feminist narratives that may be of much benefit to some feminists as well as many African women.

#### Introduction

*Bashi Cingo* are men who are assigned to preserve the bodies of some Bemba chiefs when they die. When a Bemba chief dies, such as *Chitimukulu* and *Nkula*, his body is not buried within a few days, but it is embalmed until the harvest of the following

1 Dr Bridget N. Masaiti Mukuka is Dean of Research at the United Church of Zambia University, Lusaka Campus. She is also a research associate at Stellenbosch University. [Email: nondeb@gmail.com]

2 In referring to 'Bemba women and culture', this chapter uses Bemba as an umbrella term. The reason is that within the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church of Zambia there are different groups of Bemba people, coming from various provinces. For instance, the Luapula people(s) are also part of the large Bemba-speaking group in Zambia. The differences within the other groups are due mainly to the Luapula Bemba-speaking tribes being primarily fishermen. The Bemba people hold in common the feature of being organised in matrilineal clans. They include the Bemba, Bisa, Aushi, Ngumbu, Chishinga, Mukulu, Kawendi, Shila, Tabwa and Lamba, to mention a few (Cunnison, 1959). All these occupy much of North-Eastern Zambia and extend into South-Eastern Katanga. This also includes the whole of Kasama, Mpika, Chinsali, Luwingu and Mporokoso. To the west, south and east are the Bisa. To the west, further into the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are the Aushi and their subgroups. The Mambwe-Lungu are found in the northern provinces of North-Eastern Zambia (Cunnison, 1959; Whiteley, 1950).

year. The process of embalming is done traditionally using soup made from *ilanda* (black-eyed beans). Research conducted in an African Initiated Church (AIC), namely the Sweetheart of Nimbi, indicates that some male members of the church are appointed as *Bashi Cingo*. It is believed that when *Bashi Cingo* are performing their duties, they are not allowed to sleep with their wives. The wives are forbidden to work in the fields, because it is believed that they will pollute the land.

Guided by the feminist method of inquiry of Oduyoye (1995) and Fiorenza (2011), the chapter reports on a qualitative investigation of some rituals and taboos around the wives of *Bashi Cingo* from the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church. The chapter concludes by positing that women should deconstruct the rituals and taboos that are formulated in terms of male power, because they hinder the women from achieving their full humanity. The sample size of the research was six, two men and four women. This chapter utilised numbers such as 'woman number 6' (W6) to identify the participants in the text and analyse the data. This was done to protect the anonymity of the participants. Hence, this chapter is elucidated by in-depth original research on the responses of some pertinent church members.

### Theoretical frameworks

In order to better understand the rituals or taboos around the wives of *Bashi Cingo*, the discourse is investigated through the theoretical lenses provided by Oduyoye (1995) and Fiorenza (2011). In Oduyoye's (1995) book titled *Daughters of Anowa*, she narrates the history of secret societies in West Africa, where it is believed that women were once keepers of certain secrets of divinities and had powers like those of some avenging spirits and of the Great Mother, who was believed to be the Supreme Creator.

She points out that while men were entitled to carry out all tasks, women were in charge of shrines belonging to the Great Mother. This was referred to as 'the cult of women'. However, as the years went by, the shrine belonging to the Great Mother was eventually captured by men. Women had no option but to hand over knowledge of the cult's secrets to men. Men ensured they had full knowledge of the shrine, although they had to behead the priestesses in order to possess the shrine. Oduyoye (1995) continues that to this day the cult's priests have maintained the custom of plaiting their hair and their dresses are like those of women. Because the secrets of the farms were mainly linked to the cult of the Great Mother, men taught themselves techniques of farming, while women were forbidden to take part in planting yams. She explains that the festival of the yam, originally performed by women to appease the Earth goddess, was also taken over by men. The goddess became the deity of the



men's secret societies. To date, whenever the goddess's statue is in procession, women are advised to remain in hiding, since they have to remain silent and are forbidden to be seen. According to Oduyoye (1995:32), "the Mother Goddess, who used to be the source of power for women, has been appropriated by men and is now the reigning deity of men's secret societies that demand that women remain voiceless and out of sight." The role of women that was once in power has been sidelined. Women's voices have been silenced. Oduyoye (1995:31-32) asserts that

[s]everal West African communities have exclusive men's secret societies associated with creation and agriculture that provide the means for keeping order in the society. This is true of the Ogboni and Oro of the Yoruba and the Poro societies of Sierra Leone. The annual demonstration of power over women in these religious festivals helps to perpetuate women's inferiority in the minds of growing boys and girls and to ensure that patriarchy reigns where once there [was] parity or, perhaps, even female leadership.

With reference to Oduyoye's (2015) statement, the majority of secret societies in West African communities reaffirm the silencing of women and make them depend largely on their male counterparts. This also indicates that some men amongst the Ogboni and Oro of the Yoruba and the Poro societies believe that because of the nature of a woman, she should not be allowed to take part in farming for fear that she may "pollute the land". Thus, the power of societal norms prevents the participation of women in agriculture and other leadership positions. This is similar to the rituals around the wives of *Bashi Cingo* that prevent women from farming.

To this end, Oduyoye (2001a) is calling on both men and women to examine African culture with gendered lenses, thereby inviting both of them to create a culture of inclusiveness. Oduyoye (2001b) argues that in Africa, particularly in the AICs, "women are the keenest participants in the religious provisions or regulations that link women with evil and make men the innocent victims of women's sexuality" (Oduyoye, 2001b:19). Oduyoye's (2001b) concern corresponds with that of some African women theologians. They observe that the authority and interpretations of the Bible have been exercised with a focus on the oppression and subordination of women. Some African churches, in their quest to 'absolutise' the Bible, have preached the story of Eve to emphasise the wrong things that have been caused by women. The story of Eve allows human separation from God, thereby allowing human beings to respond to God out of their own free will. She argues that the narrative of the Eve story needs to be examined critically so that it allows inclusiveness in the church and society (Oduyoye, 2001b). The answer to Oduyoye's (2001b) call for inclusiveness could be seen in the latter part of Genesis 3:6b. However, the role of Eve is in consonance with Oduyoye's (1995:32) contention that "women were in charge of shrines belonging to the Great Mother".

In her publication titled *Transforming vision: Explorations in feminist theology*, Fiorenza (2011) divides her work into four sections. The first section deals with feminist theory and theology. The second section outlines feminist theology and struggle. The third section deals with Catholicism as a site of feminist struggle, and the fourth section concentrates on feminist revisions of the divine (see Fiorenza, 2011:198). While it is not the intention of this chapter to explore the entire book, the chapter focuses mainly in the fourth section. Here, Fiorenza (2011:198) explores a wide range of issues, such as violence against women, anti-Judaism in feminist theology, the concept of Mariology, and the concept of monotheism.

Fiorenza (2011) indicates that many churches have developed a very positive image of Mary, mother of Jesus. I use an example from the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, where members admire Mary's characteristics; they imitate these characteristics and venerate her. They believe that Mary is the mediator, because she is the mother of God. However, Fiorenza (2011) is critical of some churches, such as the Sweetheart of Nimbi, that imitate the role of Mary, arguing that this is mainstream Mariology that continues to inscribe a weaker sociocultural image of the feminine and sanctifies the marginalisation and exploitation of women. While Fiorenza (2011) sees this as one way of exploiting women, some women in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church believe that this is positive, because it empowers some women to appreciate their motherhood. Furthermore, Fiorenza (2011:198) argues that "in holding up to women the image of the perpetual virgin and sorrowful mother Mary, churchmen are preaching a model of femininity that ordinary women cannot imitate". Fiorenza (2011) advocates the abandonment of a Mariological type of preaching, since imitating Mary in a modernist society has turned into a postmodern issue. But this is a paradox, since Mary and her characteristics are unique symbols that ordinary women cannot reach, yet Emilio (a founder of the church) teaches them to his members.

Such conceptions are ideological. Fiorenza (2011:199) argues that "it is overlooked that these ideologising and mythologising forms of *kyriarchal* Mariology often go hand in hand with a conservative politics of ecclesiastical and societal restoration that is contrary to the vision of the discipleship of equals". I argue that in a church like the Sweetheart of Nimbi, the possibility of finding a vision of the discipleship of equals amongst members might be rare. This is because the doctrine/s often seem to surpass the members' natural human understanding. It is, therefore, considered a privilege for the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church members to direct all their prayers to Mary, whom they strongly believe is their senior Saviour.

## Women, male power and the environment

In the same way, secrecy in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church is a custom that is attached to Emilio, and it has found symbolic expression when all the members respect and honour Emilio. This is reflected in the saying “*ubufumu bucindikwa kubene*”, literally meaning “honour is given to whom it is due”. As the church founder and having been born from the lineage of Bemba chiefs, whatever he ideologises is not questioned. It is in situations such as these that Scott (1990) suggests ideological and symbolic dissent are similar. In a metaphorical manner, the hidden transcript determines the acts that should be performed on stage. To uncover the hidden transcripts of the people, it is important to assess the circumstances that are experienced by subordinate groups and what these would mean within the public transcript. Scott (1990:14) points out three dimensions in which these may occur. “First, the hidden transcript is specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors” (Scott, 1990:14). Second, “...it does not contain only speech acts but a whole range of practices ... for many peasants, activities such as poaching, pilfering, clandestine tax evasion, and intentionally shabby work for landlords are part and parcel of the hidden transcript” (Scott, 1990:14). Third, there is a thin line between public and hidden transcripts, and this exacerbates the struggle between dominant and subordinate groups. The capacity of dominant groups to define what may be called public transcripts and to maintain that which is hidden remains in their power to control. This struggle between the dominant and dominated groups is one of the common conflicts that exist in our daily lives (Scott, 1990:14). Thus, if there is not much pressure from the subordinates to reorder the pattern of domination, “others will exploit that breach and a new, de facto limit governing what may be said will have been established incorporating the new territory” (Scott, 1990:196). In the same way, members exalt Emilio for being the ‘Parent of Truth’ and receiver of divine revelations. It is in this way that his own children will also rise and establish their own territories.

Using the words of Fiorenza (2011:200), the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church members “have developed a very positive image of Mary”. They revere Mary. The members of the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church exalt Mary. They believe that Mary mediates between humanity and God, inasmuch as Mary is both their liberator and their mother. They admire Mary’s characteristics; they imitate them, and they venerate her. They believe that Mary is the mediator because she is the mother of God. Mary is referred to as *Mayo Nakabumba*, literally Mother of the Creator, Seat of Wisdom or *Namfumumu*, meaning Mother of the King or literally *Nyinefwe*, which means ‘Our Mother’. All these are titles of exaltation for Mary in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church. The Sweetheart of Nimbi Church uses the symbol of Mary in

many forms. First, Mary is used as a symbol of purity because they have been taught that she had no sin. Mary received no temptation from the devil. Second, Mary is used as a symbol of fertility. It is from this premise that the wives of the *Bashi Cingo* are forbidden to go to the fields, for they may pollute the environment. Instead, they should remain in their given homes so that they do not pollute the land or contaminate others. Mary cared for and maintained her pregnancy without thinking of an abortion. Third, Mary is used as a symbol of life. She gave birth to Jesus. She nurtured Jesus and taught him God's ways. The Bible does not state that Mary went to the fields (interview with W6).

Fourth, Mary is seen and portrayed as a symbol of humility. It is through Mary that the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church members believe that God has both feminine and masculine characteristics. This is revealed through Mary, since she is the 'Senior Redemptrix' over Jesus. Mary is used as the mediator between humanity (Emilio) and God. Fifth, it is through Emilio that Mary has established her own church with Black people, that is, the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church (Burlington, 2008). This is because through Mary's saviourhood and her relationship with her favoured child, Emilio, and her children, the Africans, there was something that was hidden from the Europeans, just as the messiah-ship of Jesus was also hidden from the Jews (Burlington, 2008). These are some of the reasons why Mary is revered. Loades (1996:128) is of the view that "Mary is taken into dialogue with God, as a woman of courageous choice, proclaiming God's vindication of those who need it, surviving poverty, flight, exile and so on". To the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church members, Mary's conversation with the angel Gabriel portrays how she humbled herself. It is for this reason that church members portray Mary's humility in songs and prayers, as they believe that Mary obeyed God's command and she was highly favoured because of that.

From this perspective, Fiorenza (2011) observes that male dominance, Mariology, and the cult of Mary degrade both men and women in four ways. First, they emphasise that virginity is detrimental to sexuality. Second, they do this in a unilateral manner; for example, they associate the model of 'true womanhood' with that of motherhood. Third, they do this in a religious manner. For example, they valorise obedience, passivity, humility and submissiveness as being the cardinal virtues of women. Fourth, this is done by constructing an essentialising gender complementarity that sustains the structural oppression of women (Fiorenza, 2011). For instance, while the Roman Catholic Church had various orders under the patronage of Mary, they did not have 'nurses of Jesus'.<sup>3</sup> However, Emilio, using the

3 It was highlighted that in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church all the priests, as well as the other members of the church who have leadership positions, undergo a three-year training course that is done within their Parishes. During this training, both men and women are called Nurses of Jesus (NJs). This is where

Bemba culture, has initiated one – the ‘nurses of Jesus’. In the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, this is blended with Christian traditions and Bemba cultural perspectives. It is embedded within Bemba culture.

Fiorenza (2011) explains that because of the brokenness and inadequacy of the human language, some readers read ‘woman’ as a subject and/or object of inquiry. She refers to her own work as decolonising the human language. She insists that women do not share a unitary essence but are multiple and fractured in many different ways by race, class, age, sexuality, and gender (Fiorenza, 2011). Fiorenza’s (2011) use of the term “wo/man” is one way of indicating this fracture.

### Background of the founder of the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church

The founder of the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, Emilio Chishimba, was born in Ipusukilo, Zambia in the Luwingu district around 1921. This was the time the Society of Missionaries of Africa (SMA), hereafter the White Fathers, made strategic plans to establish themselves within the largest tribe, which was the Bemba. Emilio’s mother and father became Roman Catholic converts. His mother’s name was Chilufya (Chishimba, 1976). They embraced Catholicism to the extent that Emilio joined the minor seminary at Lubushi when he was ten years old and was later sent to the major seminary of Kipalapala in Tanzania in 1940. He spent three years studying scholastic philosophy and theology. During that time, he was increasingly beset by the fear that he was not holy enough to receive the priesthood of Jesus Christ (Hinfelaar, 1994). Emilio’s mother, Chilufya, came from the royal clan of *Chitimukulu* in Kasama that is purely matrilineal. Chilufya had eight children.

*Chitimukulu* simply means ‘a big tree with many branches’. In Kasama, the Paramount Chief of the Bemba people is known as *Chitimukulu*. Some Bemba paramount chiefs, just like many other Zambian chiefs, look after their mothers. In most Bemba tribes, whether the Bemba-Bisa, Bemba-Aushi or Bemba-Lunda, mothers are very important and significant because it is believed that they are the ones who give birth to and nurture the chiefs. Some mothers of the Bemba chiefs hold leadership roles in society. Since they are consulted about carrying out some tasks, they have the final say and are honoured by their subjects. That is the reason they are regarded as mothers of kings. In Bemba, this is referred to as *Banamfumu*, literally mothers of kings. For instance, Burlington’s (1998) article has discussed how Chilufya is elevated and, in some sense, equated to Mary, Mother of Jesus. Although Chilufya gave birth to Emilio, honour is also given to Emilio’s grandfather and grandmother.

---

they are trained to observe the characteristics of Mary, Mother of Jesus. (For more information on this, see Bridget Masaiti, PhD dissertation, Stellenbosch University.)



In many African cultures, such as the Bemba, the grandfather and grandmother represent figures of authority.

In some of the Bemba documents that he wrote for his church members, Emilio explains how his attention was caught by the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ. Gazing at the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ made Emilio see himself as a searcher for truth, known in the Bemba language as *Ukufwaisha ichishinka* (Chishimba, 1976). Emilio initiated families into the practice of gazing at the Sacred Heart, an image that was found in most Christian homes. As Hinfelaar (1994:104) writes:

Emilio exhorted the members to fast from time to time, to abstain from alcohol, and amidst the noise of life in the compounds to spend long hours in deep silence in order to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony ... The white missionaries, whose primary goal was to plant the visible church and had little time to introduce their neophytes to the mystical aspect of Christian prayer, had taught them to express their new religion through the recitation of long prayers and singing of hymns.

In trying to integrate Christianity and traditional religions, many Bemba people acknowledged his preaching and admired Emilio's teaching. Hinfelaar (1994) asserts that Emilio attracted the cream of the teachers, catechists and other lay leaders of the Catholic Church who were trying to integrate their own religious background with the teaching of Christian belief and morality. Emilio established some parishes that, in the Bemba language, are still referred to as *Namfumus*, meaning 'Mother/s of Kings'.<sup>4</sup>

### Death of the church founder

In the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, ritual practice is the norm. Arbuckle (2010:82) defines a ritual as "any prescribed or spontaneous action that follows a set pattern expressing through symbols a public or shared meaning". A ritual is a repeated expression of some symbolic nature; for instance, in the Church, members bow or lie prostrate before they greet Emilio. Some leadership roles are generally associated with rituals. Rituals tend to portray the power of leaders over their subordinates.

Emilio died in Lusaka in February 2015 and was buried in his village in September 2015. Emilio died at one of his *Namfumu* steads (parishes) in Lusaka. He was buried in his home village in Luwingu in September 2015. In many instances, when a Bemba chief dies, burial takes place after one year. The body of the chief is kept

4 Emilio used the Bemba titles, where sisters of the Bemba chiefs and their girl-children are called *banamfumu*, meaning mothers of kings (Whiteley, 1951; Richards, 1940). He also derived this from the concept of Mariology, since Mary, Mother of Jesus, is referred to as Mother of King in the Council of Ephesus (Rakoczy, 2004; Fiorenza, 2011).

in a separate hut, where some special men (*Bashi Cingo*) are assigned the duty of traditional embalming. Since Emilio came from the royal family, his body was embalmed using soup made from *ilanda* or black-eyed beans.

This meant that the *Bashi Cingo* and their wives had to move out of their houses and were camping within the *Namfumu* steads, the congregations that were initiated by Emilio. In fact, they are kept near the *Namfumu* steads and not within them, because there are some other members who live near these congregations. The wives accompanied their husbands because they were supposed to be cooking for them, but were not allowed to engage in farming. Since farming is linked to fertility, the wives of the *Bashi Cingo* are not supposed to interact with other members of the community or the church, or engage in farming or water drawing for fear of polluting the land and the water wells. This issue of not allowing some wives to engage in farming where they can cultivate their own food or clean the water wells is linked to the environment. This has an impact on the environment.

Since Bemba culture is matrilineal, it means many women own the land. They do more of the farm work than their husbands, who mainly trim the trees. Women clear the fields with their children and till the land. Women take turns to clean the water wells. They even water some of their crops. They draw water and collect firewood. But if they are meant to stay indoors because they may pollute the land, it is certain that the environment and the children will suffer the most, because there will be no experienced women to clear the fields, clean the water wells, tend to the children and draw water. If, for example, some wives insist on going to the farm, the church will acquire a small portion of land for them that is situated far from the other fields. Because of the nature of the rituals, the *Bashi Cingo* and their wives leave their children to be looked after in other *Namfumu* steads until the cultural process of embalming and burial of the chief has been completed. In terms of the wives who have not asked for their own fields, the *Bashi Cingo* take turns in taking care of the wives by providing food for them.

In response to the interview, W4 highlighted that after eight months of mourning their chief, she found it difficult to attend prayers while being excluded from both farming and her family members. Some church superiors approached her. They asked W4 to go for prayers, since she knew the call of her husband was divine and from God. In contrast, W2 stated that “Emilio was guided by the Spirit of God to formulate all these rules that are even found in Leviticus and he was from the royal family ... I was excited because I knew God would not fail me ... being *Bashi Cingo's* wife, I left my five children and my family, and went to live in isolation.”

In other cases, some of the male members of the church explained that the death and preservation of Emilio's body should not be viewed as a taboo, because many people

are aware that their leader originated from the royal family. They revealed that there are a number of cultural procedures to be carried out before the chief is buried. For instance, M3 indicated that there are some men who are assigned to preserve the body of the chief and there are some men who are assigned to bury the chief. The two are separate. By the time the chief is declared dead to the *Bashi Cingo*, it is the duty of the *Bashi Cingo* to inspect some of the chief's body parts, such as fingers, toenails, teeth, eyes and other body parts. According to M3, "[t]he reason for doing this is to ensure that no one has removed some parts from the chief's body, such as a tooth, a nail or to cut some of the hair." Asked why people would do such a thing, M3 indicated that there are many reasons people do this because they have different beliefs, some of them being issues connected with authority or power. It is important to note that Emilio's preaching also underlies issues of knowledge and power that he acquired from both the seminary where he studied and from the Bemba chieftaincy from where he comes.

### Knowledge and power

Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) argue that power operates within three interrelated modalities. These are hegemony, ideology and culture. The religious beliefs and values in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church fall within these three spheres of power; hegemony, ideology and culture. For instance, when we examine the role of the Bemba Paramount Chiefs, they hold authority in their hands. Some Bemba chiefs do not marry one wife, but many women. The wives of Bemba chiefs are referred to as *Abasano*, literally meaning belonging to the royal clan. There are many reasons for the men to have several wives. It may be because they hold authority in their hands or because of prestige (Mbiti, 1999); furthermore, a chief has the liberty to choose which woman he wants to marry.

As knowledge is generally linked to power, this chapter argues that power is also related to knowledge and influences specific people in social situations. Purvis (1993:20) defines power as "the ability to accomplish desired ends and social power [or] the ability of one individual or group to affect the behavior of another individual or group". This chapter defines power as an instrument used by a male person to impart knowledge or teachings to others. An African priest with power and knowledge has acquired such knowledge from certain sources and is therefore using knowledge as a skill to teach and convert people to African Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Becker (1996:164) defines power as "the capacity to produce change". This means there are possibilities for changing or influencing the mind-set of others. This kind

5 The term 'African Christianity' in this chapter indicates the good news of Jesus Christ and the world views of some Bemba people in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church.

of power is what is known as silent and subtle (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1999). It is silent in some way and positive, because members are being taught how to read and understand the Bible and imitate the kind of lifestyle lived by the Israelites in Old Testament times.

Malina (1983:26) defines power as “the ability to exercise control over the behavior of others”. He views power as a symbol that should not be confused with physical force. For Malina (1983), power is also associated with the weak. He states that some parents and teachers often control the behaviour of children without the use of physical force. But, in exercising their power, these characters create very real unpleasant consequences for those under their sway (Malina, 1983). However, Malina (1983) does not view power as a form of violence such as applied by some teachers and parents.

For Nuckolls (1996), cultural goals (similar to those of Emilio) cannot be reached, since they represent values that contradict each other. Such kinds of contradictory cultural goals “generate dialectics, and such dialectics become the framework of knowledge systems” (Nuckolls, 1996:117). In this sense, Emilio was motivated to reach a cultural goal that could not be reached. His aim to teach the concept of Mariology to his members could not be achieved, unless he welcomed and exploited a dialectic (instead of a static position) whereby members imitate the lifestyle of Old Testament times when they are amongst themselves in the *Namfumuls*, which contrast with their preference to live and experience a modern kind of lifestyle.

While polygamy may not be practised widely amongst commoners, polygamous marriages do occur amongst the Bemba chiefs, who “may have as many as several dozen wives” (Whiteley, 1950:18). Richards (1940) observes that the Bemba people regard married life as the only possible existence for a normal man and woman, and in this way they resemble other African peoples. Bemba men and women desire children passionately, for there is a craving for offspring. Richards (1940:17) argues that “to produce and possess children is one of the strongest ambitions of Bemba life”. Richards (1940) was a missionary who lived and researched widely amongst the Bemba people during the colonial era. The wives of chiefs are well secured, because they live in huts fenced around a common stockade (Whiteley, 1950). In the midst of all this, there is an issue of power that is designed to control the wives of chiefs. The Bemba chiefs do not live in the fenced huts with their wives, but have their own palaces where they live. In Bemba language, the chiefs’ palaces are known as *Kumusumba wa Mfumu*. However, it is from these palaces that the Bemba chiefs control their wives and children’s huts by assigning guards to be in charge of them.



## Unmasking the rituals and symbols

Fiorenza (2011:198) argues that “feminist criticism has unmasked the images and symbols of hegemonic Mariology as the religious projection of a celibate, male priestly hierarchy – a projection which has ideologically legitimized male domination in church and society”. In the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, however, this still needs to be unmasked. Emilio’s teachings lean on the Bible, thereby propagating holy patriarchy, which is reinforced by African culture, particularly the Bemba patriarchy (Ramphele, 1989).

Fiorenza’s (2011) publication is key to this chapter, because it offers a theory that aims at dismantling the distortions of relationships between men and women as a result of masculine exegesis of the Bible. In the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, more pressure is applied on girls than on boys that they should be virgins before getting married. If a virgin marries but experiences difficulties to conceive, it is permissible for a man to choose another woman or even a sister, who may bear children for him. This is why Fiorenza (2011:199) argues that this is a way of “associating the model of true womanhood with that of motherhood”. It does not matter if a woman is hardworking or not, because in many African contexts true womanhood is associated with hard work, while childbearing is associated with motherhood. In contrast, women in many parts of the world may not be allowed to take another man if her husband does not embody a model of fatherhood.

In many cases, this is a religious ideology that Emilio preached to his members. His members are taught to be obedient, humble and to submit to and valorise Mary, mother of Jesus. But one may observe that this kind of teaching lands more in the ears, minds and hearts of women than men. It is because of the duty of their husbands, the *Bashi Cingo*, that the wives have to obey the rules of accompanying their husbands and being isolated from the entire community. While the *Bashi Cingo* will be busy with their traditional embalming job, their wives are restricted from working in the fields or cleaning the wells or drawing water. The *Bashi Cingo* take turns in providing food for their wives. This means that the *Bashi Cingo* are allowed to go to the fields and draw water from the wells even though they may be on duty. The *Bashi Cingo* cannot pollute the land, but the women can. This shows that the church has sustained the structural oppression of women, which relates to issues of religion, culture and power.

All these are issues of power, because religion, including Christianity, is a manifestation of power, just as Bemba cultural values are symbols of power. Emilio saw his role as part of the Bemba royal lineage, where his Mother (Chilufya) was like *Namfumumu* (proto-Mary). These two powers and belief systems operate concurrently

but not without tension. Tensions exist because the wives of the *Bashi Cingo* are excluded from performing some duties, although the job done by the *Bashi Cingo* is so intense that they are the ones who should be excluded from performing the duties, such as going to the fields and interacting with other community members. One could point out that Emilio was the patriarch (Saviour) in the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church, and a 'Father of Truth', a patriarch who is the protector of women in a way that discriminates against them in the Bemba cultural dispensation. The men perform the duties assigned to them, yet the women bear the consequences of leaving their loved ones and working in the fields. The church disempowers women, in the sense that they remain voiceless. They do not share the happiness with their husbands and other family members, as well as being restricted from going to the fields, drawing water and other things.

However, the role of the *Bashi Cingo* should be questioned in their act of preserving the chief's dead body. Questions, such as 'How do they feel?' and 'Who appoints them?' were asked during the interviews. Some of the answers to the questions were that appointment to becoming *Bashi Cingo* is passed on in the family lineage and that it is a great honour to belong to the *Bashi Cingo* clan. These rituals have been brought into the church because, according to the church members, they are part of the Bemba tradition and culture. However, they dehumanise and diminish the roles of women in a number of areas such as limiting their husbands' sexual desires, having no interaction with family members and friends, and the worst part is that they are not allowed to fetch water from the wells or go to the fields or farms. This, therefore, means that they are both spiritually and culturally disconnected.

These are ideologies. Fiorenza (2011) is of the view that these ideologies and dogmas that were articulated during the time of the Greco-Roman imperial form of Christianity were institutionalised and have remained historically operative. She argues that "indeed, it is overlooked that these ideologizing and mythologizing forms of kyriarchal Mariology often go hand in hand with a conservative politics of ecclesiastical and societal restoration that is contrary to the vision of the discipleship of equals" (Fiorenza, 2011:199). As Emilio is also considered a sacred person by the members of his church, he is the one who established the structures in his church. It should be noted that members of the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church might be referred to as a group of subordinates. Scott (1990:27) stresses that "the hidden transcript of subordinate groups, in turn, reacts back on the public transcript by engendering a subculture and by opposing its own variant form of social domination against that of the dominant elite. Both are realms of power and interest."

Fiorenza (2011) and Oduyoye (1979) have argued that Christianity should take into consideration the African belief that God delegates authority to intermediary beings.

Arguing from an African woman theologian's perspective, Oduyoye (1979:112) stresses that there is a widespread belief in the "divine right of kings". This view is most often sanctioned by African religions. She states that, in most cases, the divine rulers or kings are cultic individuals and their personalities are considered sacred. Such is the case with the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church's founder, who is considered sacred and all that he says derives from the divine. Hewitt (2016) points out that the mission of the church should focus on the life-giving, life-saving, and life-sustaining character and mission of the triune God pertinent to the contextual realities of the world. To this end, the task of the church is to evangelise a message that gives life and joy to all of humanity (Bevans, 2016).

Oduyoye (1995) advocates that women should not close their eyes and seal their lips if they need to denounce injustice. Such injustice may be evident in the that way the wives of the *Bashi Cingo* are excluded from the community and from performing other duties that assist with providing food. Oduyoye (1995) explains that prophetic works are not just meant for men in communities. She advises that denouncing social and religious injustices is necessary to allow the prophetic works that call on communities for healing. Oduyoye (1995:33) observes that, as nurturers of the generations, women should mediate the sense of urgency where they should "share the powers and mysteries of life without resorting to violence". In Oduyoye's (1995) view, women are not created to be violent, but they should work peacefully to restore their position and power. By doing this, women will save not only themselves and their families, but will save and heal the whole community, since "it is one person who kills the elephant for the whole people to feast on" (Oduyoye, 1995:33). This resonates with the fact that women too are bearers of knowledge, power and wisdom, since they are the nurturers of generations.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that some African rituals and power affect some wives of the *Bashi Cingo*, who are also church members. It illustrates how issues of power intersect with those of sexuality, humanity and the environment. These findings are unique to the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church. The chapter illustrates the role of the *Bashi Cingo*, who are assigned the task of embalming the dead body of the chief, in the church. Traditionally, the soup made from *ilanda* (black-eyed beans) has been used to smear over the body so that it does not rot. Because farming is linked to fertility, the wives of the *Bashi Cingo* are not allowed to be intimate with their husbands or to work in the fields or to draw water for fear that the women may pollute the land.

The findings show that Mary is one of the symbolic figures adopted by the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church. The chapter has portrayed how members imitate the characteristics of Mary as a form of humility. The findings also show that both holy patriarchy (a biblical-derived patriarchy) and African (Bemba) patriarchy are at work in the church founder's teachings and structural formulation. These teachings and formulation of the church structures are embedded in patriarchal ideologies, which include biblical, cultural and hegemonic values. In addition to the arguments by some feminist theologians outlined in the chapter, I have shown that these patriarchal ideologies are power structures that interlock with each other amongst the Bemba. In the biblical traditions, the church founder has portrayed himself as a patriarch, while in the royal Bemba tradition he projected himself as royalty.

In his teachings, Emilio has incorporated some Bemba cultural values to put across his biblical message. In the same way, members of the Sweetheart of Nimbi Church might be portrayed as enriching their beliefs with a Bemba culture associated with their spiritual beliefs. This is a paradox. For example, the members' imitation of Mary shows how they have received the preaching from their founder. They believe that Mary and the other women never went to draw water; they never went to the fields during the crucifixion of Jesus. It is a paradox because members of the church are motivated to imitate religious and cultural goals that cannot be reached, thereby imitating the unseen gestures.



## References

- Arbuckle, G.A. 2010. *Culture, inculturation, and theologians: A postmodern critique*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.
- Becker, C.E. 1996. *Leading women: How church women can avoid leadership traps and negotiate the gender maze*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Bevans, B.S. 2016. Transforming discipleship: Missiological reflections. In K.R. Ross, J. Keum, K. Avtzi & R.R. Hewitt (eds), *Ecumenical missiology: Changing landscapes and new conceptions of missions*. Oxford: World Council of Churches. 404-422.
- Burlington, G. 1998. Topography of a Zambian storyland. *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 15(2):75-81. <https://bit.ly/3eGWK71> [Accessed 20 May 2017].
- Burlington, G. 2008. God makes a world of difference: The dialectic of motivation and meaning at the creation of an African theistic worldview. *Missiology: An International Review*, (4):435-445. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182960803600403> [Accessed 12 April 2015].
- Chishimba, E.M. 1976. Full image of God revealed in Africa: The keys to the full Bible. Unpublished.
- Comaroff, J. & Comaroff, J. 1991. *Of Revelation and revelation: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa*. Vol. 1. London: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226114477.001.0001>
- Cunnison, I. 1959. *The Luapula peoples of Northern Rhodesia: Custom and history in tribal politics*. New York: Manchester University Press.
- Fiorenza, E.S. 2011. *Transforming vision: Explorations in feminist theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm87s>
- Genesis. 2012. *ESV Global Study Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers.
- Hewitt, R.R. 2016. Together towards life and the context of the Global South. In: K.R. Ross, J. Keum, K. Avtzi & R.R. Hewitt (eds), *Ecumenical missiology: Changing landscapes and new conceptions of missions*. Oxford: World Council of Churches. 473-483.
- Hinfelaar, H.F. 1994. *Bemba-speaking women of Zambia in a century of religious change: (1892-1992)*. New York: Brill.
- Loades, A. 1996. Mary. In: L. Isherwood & D. McEwan (eds), *An A to Z of feminist theology*. London: Sheffield Academic Press. 128-129.
- Malina, B.J. 1983. *The New Testament world: Insights from cultural anthropology*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.
- Mbiti, J.S. 1999. *African religions and philosophy*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Nuckolls, C.W. 1996. *The cultural dialectics of knowledge and desire*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Oduyoye, M.A. 1979. The value of African religious beliefs and practices for Christian theology. In: K. Appiah-Kubi & S. Torres (eds), *African theology en route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 109-116.
- Oduyoye, M.A. 1995. *Daughters of Anowa: African women and patriarchy*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Oduyoye, M.A. 2001a. *Introductions in feminist theology: Introducing African women's theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

- Oduyoye, M.A. 2001b. The search for the two-winged theology. In: M.A. Oduyoye & M.A. Kanyoro (eds), *Talitha Qumi: Proceedings of the convocation of African women theologians 1989*. Accra-North: Sam-Woode Ltd. 31-56.
- Purvis, S.B. 1993. *The power of the cross: Foundations for a Christian feminist ethic of community*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Rakoczy, S. 2004. *In her name: Women doing theology*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications.
- Ramphele, M. 1989. On being Anglican: The pain and the privilege in England. In: E.L. King, F. England & T. Paterson (eds), *Bounty in bondage: The Anglican church in Southern Africa: Essays in honour of Edward King, Dean of Cape Town*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press. 177-190.
- Richards, A.I. 1940. *Bemba marriage and present economic conditions*. Livingstone: The Rhodes-Livingstone Institute.
- Scott, J.C. 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Whiteley, W. 1950. *Bemba and related peoples of Northern Rhodesia*. London: International African Institute.